[*OC* II, *1242*]

# Idea of the Method in the Composition of a Book

[1] When one undertakes to write a work, one has already found the subject and at least part of the material, so that it is only a question of developing and organizing it in the way best suited to convince and to please. This part, which also includes style, is usually the part that determines the success of the work and the reputation of the Author; it is the part that makes not quite for whether a Book is good or bad, but for whether it is well or badly crafted.

[2] It is difficult to form a good working plan unless one has an exact Mind and a perfect knowledge of one's material. On the other hand, with these two qualities it is difficult to make a bad one, provided one devotes to it all the attention which it requires. With the first, one takes all the parts of one's subject into account, with the other one places them in the order that shows them to best advantage and is best suited to set them off and to support one another.

[3] One can, unquestionably, form a great many different projects each one of which is good in relation to its particular object: without entering into this in inexhaustible detail, here is more or less the general order I would wish to follow in constructing a work involving argument: I choose this genre as my example because it is the one that requires the most method and proportion in its parts.

[4] I would first of all begin by clearly explaining the subject I set myself, carefully defining the new or equivocal ideas and words I would need to use, not successively in the form of a dictionary as mathematicians do, but [*1243*] as if prompted by the occasion and deftly inserting my definitions into the presentation of my subject. When one sets out to do a Book, one's intention is to instruct the public about something it did not know, and this is done either by teaching it new truths, or by disabusing it of some false opinions it held; in such a case an author's duty is first of all to explain the common sentiment, to show on what foundations it rests, and with what arms it is defended; when this is done well, it invariably disposes the reader in your favor, he right away sees both an educated person who does not adopt an opinion because he is ignorant of

the arguments in support of the opposite party, and an upright and sincere person who does not try to misrepresent his adversary's arguments to the reader by devious devices.

[5] In setting out, I would present what I wish to prove in such a light as to appear to grant to the opposing sentiment much more than I would really grant it, leaving it to the force of my reasons subsequently to reclaim what I will initially have conceded above and beyond what I needed to concede. This deftness is again very effective in winning the Reader's esteem. It would seem that, because of an overabundance of proofs, an Author finds himself compelled to retract the concessions which his natural moderation had led him to make.

[6] In examining a question, one usually has different kinds of proofs; first one destroys the opposite sentiment, then one establishes one's own. In both cases one draws one's arguments either from within the thing itself, or from its relations with other objects. The choice of these proofs, how they are organized and the light in which they are shown is what, above all, marks out the judicious Writer and the skillful Dialectician. A subtle analogy runs through most of the propositions one can make about one and the same subject, a hidden connection which escapes the vulgar Mind but which true genius always grasps. Once one has a hold of one end of this chain, one finds one's way with marvelous ease and is utterly astonished that an infinite number of roads that seemed to have nothing in common, or that seemed to crisscross one another in a thousand ways, yet successively lead you by the surest and shortest way to the goal [*1244*] you had set yourself. The books of Philosophers are full of Laws and maxims about this matter which pertain to two general methods. One, which they call synthesis or method of composition, by which one proceeds from the simple to the composite and which is used to teach others what one oneself knows; the other, which they call Analysis or method of resolution, and which one uses to learn what one does not know; for example, when one inquires into the genealogy of a house, one traces backward, relative by relative and ancestor by ancestor to the origin of the house, that is the Analytic way. Then one draws up a table at the head of which one places the first of the line, from whom one descends generation by generation down to the current one; that is synthesis. These methods involve quite a number and range of rules

which a capacious and exact Mind follows without giving it a thought. The same holds for Books as for Plays: one cannot begin them too simply, but up to the last moment, one constantly has to keep rising; not by an elevation of style, for the style ought always to be uniform; but by an increase in plenitude of matter and force of argument. After a lively and spirited text, the reader is overcome by disgust and boredom at the least slackening of pace; one has all the trouble in the world pulling him out of this lethargy, and in this indolence he often ignores an infinite number of good things before he recaptures the attentiveness and the interest they should have aroused in him. I would therefore wish always to begin my discussions by the weakest set of proofs. In some matters the most convincing arguments are drawn from within the subject itself; such are questions of Physics. Knowledge of the nature of plants may, for example, well be helped by knowledge of the soil that produces them, the fluids that provide their nourishment, and their specific properties; but their mechanism and springs will never be well known unless one examines them in themselves, unless one considers their entire internal structure, the fibers, valvules, tracheae, bark, pith, leaves, flowers, fruit, roots, and in a word, all the parts that go into making them up. In moral inquiries, by contrast, I would begin by examining the little we know [*1245*] about the human mind taken in itself and considered individually, I would hesitantly derive from this some few obscure and tentative bits of knowledge, but soon abandoning this dark maze, I would hasten to examine man in terms of his relations, and from this examination I would derive a host of luminous truths that would soon dispel the uncertainty of my initial arguments, while they themselves are only made clearer by contrast.

[7] Art consists not only in choosing one's proofs well and disposing them in a fair order: but also in placing them in a suitable light. The force of some simple and solid arguments consists in their very simplicity, and the least embellishment would weaken them; others, more complex, weaker or less self-evident, require the help of images and comparisons: some achieve an air of exactness and liveliness only by dint of flowers and figures [of speech]. Everywhere art has to be at work, but wherever it is most needed, it must take special lengths to hide. If the reader notices it, it is a warning to him to be wary. One also has to weigh how much one's proofs are

worth, so as to present them with no more than the degree of confidence appropriate to them. Introduce first those you rely on least, by all means: but they might be so weak that it would be dangerous to begin with them, unless one gives them a twist which announces that they are there only to precede and prepare more solid arguments.

[8] The final part of a Work may be used to resolve objections and to give examples: but there are mistakes that have to be avoided in either case.

[9] As regards objections, one ought to urge them against oneself in good faith and to make as solid a case for them as possible; most Authors pursue the worst policy in the world in this respect: They grant forces to their adversaries only in proportion to the forces they feel that they themselves have; they gauge objections in terms of their responses to them, and believe they have accomplished wonders when they have overthrown these weak obstacles. But before long they have to deal with people who are not this solicitous of them, and such disputes often end up convicting an author of ignorance and bad faith. This is avoided by [*1246*] proceeding forthrightly: When one makes one's adversaries speak one has to attribute to them as much thoughtfulness as one may have oneself, put oneself in their place, assume their opinion, tackle oneself unsparingly; if the solutions prove to be worth less than the difficulties, it would still leave a better impression than the tricks of a Writer of little sincerity who misleads and seeks to impress.

[10] In giving examples, one has to know what one is doing, giving examples simply for the sake of doing so is a Pedant's occupation: I find it laughable when in so many books and in almost all conversations I find a few particular facts adduced in proof of general propositions. That is a Schoolboy's sophism to which a judicious writer may not stoop. What! Because two or three madmen daily kill themselves in London, the English do not fear death? In that case one would daily have to allow I know not how many contradictory propositions regarding one and the same subject.

[11] In giving examples, one has to weigh; otherwise it is wasted erudition. Let us suppose I want to prove that in general women's merit is as great as men's or greater. If I refered to Semiramis someone would refer to Alexander in rejoinder, to Judith someone

would counter with Scaevola, to Lucretia with Cato Utican, with Anacreon to Sappho, and from one example to the next the list of great men would in this way soon have exceeded that of women. But if one established a proportion between the number of persons on each side who have governed States, led Armies, cultivated Letters, and the number who have been outstanding in these different Capacities, then it is obvious that the side with the greater relative quantity would really deserve primacy.

[12] When I said that objections and examples could be relegated to the last part, I did not mean to make a universal rule of this practice. On the contrary, it is a practice I would wish to follow only in the sorts of matters whose thread one cannot break without disorienting the reader and distracting him from the principal object. If your subject involves this variety you will do well to cast all this into the very body of the work and to exhaust under each heading the matters that bear on it and that you intend to use. But it is dange[*1247*]rous to make a Book cold and long by this method. A prudent Writer combines everything and settles on the form of his work only after having weighed the advantages and the disadvantages on each side.

[13] The final portion of a work may also be used to draw comparisons: especially if it is a matter of subtituting some hypotheses or systems for others, and there is no question of the authors' seeking to show the old system in an unfavorable perspective in order to let their own shine brightly. I do not dwell on this, I would only be saying things everyone knows.

[14] Above all one must know how to end. Nowadays it is fashionable to find all Books excessively long; I find a number of them excessively short, but it is their ending that always seems to me drawn out. Ancient Dramatists often weaken their dénouements in slavish subjection to I know not what bad rules they had imposed upon themselves. Remove the last two or three scenes from most of Terence's plays, their climax would be much livelier and their ending more pleasing. The same holds for a number of modern books. Peroration is a Rhetorician's device; if you have said what needed saying and as it needed to be said in the body of the work, the reader will be perfectly capable of drawing the conclusion.

Charly Guyot, the editor of the *OC* edition of this essay, thinks it was written about 1745: *OC* II, pp. ci, 1933. The manuscript is at Harvard. [6] **synthesis . . . analysis**: Rousseau's brief description of the two methods closely follows the language of the so-called *Port Royal Logic* (Antoine Arnault and Pierre Nicole, *Logic, or the Art of Thinking*, translated and edited by Jill Vance Booker, CUP, Cambridge, 1996; first edition, 1662), Part IV, chapter II, near the beginning; his illustration of these methods in terms of a genealogy corresponds to the example in § 4 of that chapter; the parallel has also been noted by Goldschmidt,

*Anthropologie et politique*, p. 31. For further references, see G. Tonelli, "Analysis and Synthesis in 18th Century Philosophy Prior to Kant," *Archiv für Begriffsgeschichte* (1979), 20:178–213, and R. Kennington, "Analytic and Synthetic Methods in Spinoza's *Ethics*," in R. Kennington ed., *The Philosophy of Baruch Spinoza* (The Catholic University of America, Washington, DC, 1980), pp. 293–318. Rousseau consistently criticizes the analytic method: see especially [10] below, and *On War* [13] with Editorial Notes, and the Introduction to *SC* tr.

[10] **Because two or three madmen daily kill themselves in London** . . . Compare: ". . . it was a good answer that was made by one who when they showed him hanging in a temple a picture of those who had paid their vows as having escaped shipwreck, and who would have him say whether he would not now acknowledge the power of the gods, – 'Aye,' asked he again, 'but where are they painted who drowned after their vows?'" Bacon, *Novum Organum*, The First Book of Aphorisms, no. xlvi.

[11] **Semiramis**, the mythical Assyrian Queen noted for her wisdom and beauty who is said to have founded Babylon, and established its hanging gardens; **Alexander** the Great; **Judith** the Jewish heroine who delivered her people by trapping and slaying Holofernes, a general of Nebuchadnezzar, King of Nineveh; **Scaevola** . . . **Lucretia** . . . **Cato Utican**: all three are also mentioned in *Last Reply* [51]–[53]; **Anacreon** (*c.* 570–485), Greek poet of light and graceful lyrics; **Sappho** (fl. *c.* 600), greatly admired, prolific lyric poet.